THE EC LANGUAGE POLICY AND CONTENT-BASED LEARNING IN ROMANIA

Anca Cehan

The Romanian education context is such that there is relatively little foreign language input outside the classroom, and that the classroom input may not be enough. For this reason, foreign language teachers may opt for skill-building over building communicative competence, claiming that there is not enough time for "the real thing". Development of recent approaches, new specific materials and textbooks, including content-based learning (also known as CLIL - Content and Language Integrated Learning) seems a possible solution.

1. Students

For many of the Romanian students, who are likely to use the English learnt in school throughout their lives, the time spent in foreign language lessons practising grammar, learning words, speaking, reading or writing, is enjoyable, easy and successful. However, many more students leave school being able to use very little of the foreign language which they spent so much time learning. For them, the investment of time and effort in the English classrooms has disappointing outcomes. When they leave school and later in their lives, they find it difficult to use the foreign language they know as this is either not enough or not what would help them in their jobs. The language they learn in school cannot be used as a tool for real-life communication in the everyday situations in which they may have to operate. When it is too late, they may realise that it does not make sense to have spent all this time learning a language which they cannot use in real life situations. For such people, more important in point of effective language learning and communication is not *what they know* but *how they could use it*.

2. Schools

The learning process organised in schools is very much a situation-specific matter. The kind of schools that students attend provide strong influences on the teaching - learning process, and it is counterproductive to ignore them. The implementation of an appropriate methodology depends on the teachers' ability to find out in the classroom what is the extent to which the knowledge and skills acquired or learnt in the classroom can be transferred into activities accountable later on.

Although it is possible to generalise about some social principles, and to say, for instance, that classroom cultures are influenced by the cultures outside the classroom, or that there is likely to be conflict between teacher and student agendas, it is not possible to generalise about the precise nature of a particular classroom culture, or the other cultures

which influence it, or the form which this influence takes. This has to be worked through in the specific situation in which the teaching - learning process takes place. The implications are not simple: the class teacher should be aware of who the students in a particular classroom are, what their needs and interests are, and what they are able to do. The class teacher has the role of seeing what is going on and finding out about the relevant backgrounds of all parties involved. Other parties, such as curriculum developers, materials and textbook writers, school administration, may also be involved in making decisions about the nature of classroom teaching and learning through recommended syllabi, textbooks, methodology, materials, and equipment.

To be appropriate, materials and methodology must be sensitive to the prevailing culture surrounding any given classroom. In other words, appropriate materials and methodology must be culture-sensitive and as such they must be based on a process of learning about the classroom. The data produced by this process makes the methodology culture-sensitive and appropriate. Learning about the classroom and the ethos of the entire school is an essential aspect of finding out how to teach.

Any class and any foreign language class for that matter, is supposed to cater for the specific needs of each group of learners if not for each individual learner. The process of learning about the classroom needs involves research which can be carried out at an informal level in such a way as to be accessible to all teachers. The notion of teacher as informal researcher is already common in general education (Stenhouse 1985, Ruddock and Hopkins, 1985), and is becoming popular in English language education, too (Nunan 1990, Allwright 1992). Teachers can carry out even less formal classroom research in a way that it is fully integrated with their day-to-day work. For this kind of research Allwright and Bailey (1991) use the notion of "exploratory teaching".

3. Foreign language teaching and beyond

In Romania, many foreign language teachers work in situations where the established syllabus is not in agreement with their view of how English is learned efficiently, or the needs of their students, as perceived by the teachers. Such teachers have two options: either to simply go along with the syllabus and complain secretly to their peers, or to secretly do what they think is best and be successful, and thus credit the syllabus with undeserved merits.

However, the system offers a chance that quite a few teachers understood is worth taking: 'curriculum la decizia şcolii' ('curriculum based on school decision'), with its three alternatives: the basic core curriculum, the expanded curriculum and the optional syllabi. The *optional syllabi* may be designed by regular school teachers on different levels: subject level, curricular area level, or cross-curricular area level.

The optional syllabus developed for a subject consists in either new learning modules, activities, or projects for a subject in the national syllabus, or in a completely new syllabus for a new subject, complementary to those in the national curriculum.

The optional syllabus developed for a curricular area requires the choice of a new topic, which involves at least two subjects of the same curricular area. In designing such an optional syllabus new objectives have to be specified and related to the instructional goals of the two subjects.

The third type of optional syllabus implies at least two subjects of different curricular areas. Consequently, the input offered to students is more complex, and thus allows them to acquire high cognitive skills (e.g. generalization, transfer, extrapolation, etc.). In contrast to learning skills in isolation, when students participate in cross-disciplinary experiences, they understand better the value of what they are learning and

become more actively engaged. The optional syllabus developed on a cross-curricular area level encourages students to cross boundaries in order to find and work with authentic material on other subjects, such as history, geography or sciences, which will immediately stir their interest. In favour of cross-curricular transfer, is the idea of skills integration; through integration, skills tend to become more stable parts of a person's understanding of the world.

A cross-curricular approach in education in general, not only at the level of foreign languages, is a must of our time. It helps students to form an image of reality in its entirety, develop an integrative model of thinking, and adapt transfer methods, values and skills from one area or field to another with minimum effort or risk. Cross-curricular teaching is seen as a way to address some of the recurring problems in our school education, such as fragmentation and isolated skill instruction, and involves a conscious effort to apply knowledge, principles and values to more than one subject simultaneously. The subjects may be related through a central theme, issue, problem, process, topic or experience.

This legal provision allows teachers to develop specific syllabi, design materials and even write textbooks which respond directly to the needs of their students. Based on ethnographic study processes, such as classroom observation, insights into the feasibility of innovation for students and classroom conditions, teachers are able to find out what the students' needs really are, and starting from there, to design or adapt both syllabi and materials. Their analysis of the environment is accompanied by a tacit understanding of the psycho-cultural and micro political aspects of institutional behaviour.

One opportunity offered by this optional syllabus, as identified by foreign language teachers, is to put some time of the school week for learning other subjects, such as geography history or civilisation, or special modules through English. In this way, lessons are taught that offer opportunities to students to use English naturally, forgetting about the language and focusing mainly on the learning topic. The learning of language and the content of another subjects are mixed and each lesson has a twofold aim: one related to the subject, topic or theme, and one linked to the foreign language. Thus these kinds of lessons have a dual focus.

This approach, in itself, is not new, nor is it unknown in Romania. Over the years, teachers have tried to teach foreign languages through other subjects and other topics. This is the philosophy behind bilingual schools and classes, where a foreign language is used as a medium of teaching and learning. It has been felt that students benefit from the focus being less on the language in terms of grammar, functions, or lexis, and more on the content or topic. By choosing topics that learners are already somehow familiar with, currently studying or interested in, the hope is that they will learn more and faster. This approach is gaining more ground, not only in bilingual schools, but also in vocational schools.

4. CLIL

Content-based learning / Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) can be very successful in enhancing the learning of a foreign language together with another subject, and in developing in the young people a 'can do' attitude towards their own learning. CLIL lessons can offer supplementary opportunities of picking up a foreign language, while studying a content area. Naturalness appears to be one of the major assets of this approach. Dual-focus lessons offer a natural situation for language practice and development which builds on the forms learnt in the language classes. As such they can boost the learners' motivation and interest for learning the foreign language, as the language is relevant for their interests and needs. An important difference between a

foreign language lesson and a CLIL lesson is that in the latter the language is picked up more naturally. In a typical language class, the learners go through the process of sorting out sounds, patterns, structures, vocabulary, etc. In a CLIL class, it is essential for the students to understand how language works, but there is seldom enough time for learning more than the essentials. A CLIL class in English enables students to acquire subjects through the mediation of English as a foreign language and it is the subject orientation which is given a special focus. It can combine sector-specific target language knowledge with job-specific communication competencies.

CLIL promotes several principles:

- **content**

At the very heart of the process of learning is placed successful content or subject learning, the acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding characteristic for that subject. The traditional transmission model for content delivery which conceptualises the subject as a body of knowledge to be transferred from teacher to learner is not longer considered appropriate. Rather, a symbiotic relationship is stressed between the foreign language and the subject, which demands a focus on how subjects are taught while working *with* and *through* another language rather than *in* another language. This important shift in focus has determined the redefinition of methodology to take account of language use by both teachers and students, which encourages real engagement and interactivity. It has also brought about teacher reflection on how best to teach. This means consideration of issues fundamental to the education process itself. Consequently, CLIL has implications for teacher education and training.

- **communication**

The foreign language is seen as a conduit for both communication and learning. It is learned through use in authentic, unrehearsed, yet 'scaffolded' situations.

By using English as the medium of instruction and communication, the foreign language teacher becomes more aware of the learners' linguistic needs and triggers tuned-in strategic language behaviour. The teacher also performs constant comprehension checks, related to content. This may result in high levels of communication between the teacher and the studens and among students themselves. CLIL stretches the learners' language and language learning potential through pushing them to produce meaningful and complex language. Thus it fosters implicit and incidental learning by focusing on meaning and communication, and providing great amounts of input. At the same time, the regular foreign language class can keep a complementary focus-on-form approach in the needed language areas. In addition, CLIL fosters fluency, whereas many simple foreign language lessons tend to focus on accuracy. Therefore, CLIL lessons are complementary to the more structured foreign language lessons. CLIL lessons build on the language learned and practised in the language lessons by providing alternative opportunities to develop a wide range of language skills, strategies and competences needed by students to function in everyday situations. The linguistic competence acquired in the language lessons may be transferred to yet another kind of language in the CLIL setting. CLIL serves to reinforce the notion that any language is a tool which, to have meaning and sense, needs to be activated in contexts which are motivating and meaningful for the learners.

- **cognition**

CLIL challenges the learners cognitively, whatever their ability. It provides a rich setting for developing thinking skills in conjunction with both basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive-academic language proficiency (CALP). Research suggests that these challenges encourage thinking to take place in different languages and at a deeper level of cultural understanding.

The potential of CLIL for successful foreign language teaching comes from meaningful input. It strengthens the students' ability to process input, which enhances cognitive development and prepares them for higher-level thinking skills. The need for more support for CLIL lessons (visual and other types), makes the teacher aware of the more general need of cognitive and interactional support that foreign language learners, particularly young learners, require. Also, CLIL facilitates the transfer of literacy skills from the mother tongue to the foreign language.

- **pluriculturality**

Language, thinking and culture are inextricably linked, and CLIL may provide an ideal opportunity for students to operate in alternative cultures through studies in an alternative language. Studying a subject through the language of a different culture paves the way for understanding and tolerating different perspectives. This element is fundamental to fostering European understanding and making European citizenship a reality.

These four principles elevate CLIL to the position of a major and significant contributor to the realisation of the European Commission's Language Policy.

In addition, CLIL provides a learning environment which makes it possible to realise modern learning theoretical and methodological concepts in an optimal way. CLIL has some clear advantages:

- **authenticity of language and content**. CLIL learners deal with authentic content and interact in a foreign language about the real world around them. Authenticity promotes the language learning process more than talking about the pseudo-real and fictitious contents of the traditional language classroom. Authenticity is a fundamental condition that gives good results.

- **learner autonomy.** In science, history, geography or other subject lessons, students make use of alternative learning strategies and study skills when they have to deal with bibliographical sources, tables, maps, or diagrams. Such materials not only provide a lot of information but also allow students a certain degree of independence. A CLIL class can be a place in which the different topics are not divided arbitrarily and taught in isolation, but as a complex whole or a place of autonomous learning in which students deal independently with the learning content.

- **conceptualisation**. CLIL does not promote only linguistic competence. It offers different 'thinking horizons' as a result of work in another language, and the way in which learners think can be modified. Being able to think about something of real interest, professionally or otherwise, can enrich the learners' understanding of concepts, and help to broaden their conceptual mapping resources. This allows better association of different concepts and helps the students towards a more sophisticated level of learning in a certain field. Classes provide situations in which the attention of the students is on some form of learning activity that is not the language itself. Students are provided opportunities to think in the foreign language, not just learn about the language itself as the major learning focus.

Students in CLIL classes often lack the cognitive language proficiency needed to process and express content area concepts. The task of the CLIL teacher is to expose learners to appropriate content designed to further their linguistic skills and to render the core concepts of the CLIL lesson accessible through language enrichment activities. This task involves sophisticated adaptation techniques and strategies, and for many teachers, it may entail a rethinking of how to present material to learners.

- **attitude towards the foreign language**. As CLIL lessons are not primarily foreign language lessons, students should be encouraged to challenge the idea of waiting to communicate in the foreign until they think they are good enough in the language to use it.

The status of the foreign language as a tool for communication and learning should be emphasised. The foreign language teacher can capitalise not only on the positive attitudes the students may have towards the language, but also on their motivation to reach the best possible outcomes in terms of learning the other subject. In addition, the students' affective filter may be lower than in other situations, for learning takes place in a relatively anxiety-free environment: a syllabus designed after enquiring about their needs, and students (often) more knowledgeable of the content than the foreign language teacher. Thus, motivation to learn content through the foreign language may foster and sustain motivation towards learning the language itself.

- **social learning.** The relevance of study topics motivates the students to understand the importance of forms of collaboration, better than in the traditional classrooms. Thus, CLIL creates a learning environment that corresponds better to modern psychological principles than do traditional learning environments. It also connects different areas of the learning curriculum into a meaningful and economic use of study time.

The pedagogical potential of CLIL is enormous and lies not only in the promotion of foreign language learning but in the adaptation of the educational structures to the EU language policy. Within such a learning environment, reaching the goal of trilingualism of all the citizens of the EU, as defined in the 1995 White Paper by the Council of Europe, seems more feasible. CLIL is far better suited than mainstream pedagogical concepts to provide for the learners' different aptitudes.

5. EC language policy

The principles behind CLIL include global statements such as 'all teachers are teachers of language' (The Bullock Report, *A language for Life*, 1975) to the advantages of cross-curricular bilingual teaching in statements from the Content and Language Integrated Project (CLIP, hosted by the British National Centre for Languages - CILT). The benefits of CLIL may be seen in terms of cultural awareness, internationalisation, language competence, preparation for both study and working life, and increased motivation.

A major outcome of CLIL is to establish not only competence in a foreign language, but also nurture a 'can do' attitude towards language learning in general. The CLIL language can be a platform by which the learners may take an interest in other languages and cultures as well.

Learning a language and learning through a language are concurrent processes, but implementing CLIL requires rethinking of the traditional concepts of the language classroom and the language teacher. The immediate obstacle for the implementation of the CLIL approach seems to be the opposition to language teaching by subject teachers, but opposition may also come from the language teachers themselves. The scarcity of CLIL teacher-training programmes suggests that the majority of teachers may be ill-equipped to do the job adequately. However, the characteristics of CLIL activities are not unfamiliar to the teachers from the foreign languages background:

- integration of language and content
- integration of receptive and productive skills
- material directly related to a content-based subject
- lessons often based on reading (and listening) authentic texts
- lessons not always graded from a language point of view. Language is functional and dictated by the context of the subject
- language emphasis placed on lexis rather than on grammar.

A CLIL approach is not unlike the humanistic, communicative and lexical approaches, as it aims to guide language processing and supports language production in the same way that a foreign language course would, by teaching techniques for exploiting reading or listening texts and structures for supporting spoken or written language.

CLIL can be both challenging and demanding for the teacher and the learners, but it can also be very stimulating and rewarding for both parties. The degree to which the teacher adopts this approach may depend on the willingness of the students, the institution in which they work, and the resources within their environment. It could be something that a school wants to consider introducing across the curriculum or something that they experiment with for a few lessons. If either of these is chosen, the advice for the foreign language teachers is that they should try to involve other subject teachers within the school. This could help both in terms of finding sources of information and in having the support of others in helping to evaluate the work. In such schools or classes, the quality of foreign language teaching will be improved through team-work and/or tandem teaching.

While CLIL may be the best-fit methodology for foreign language teaching and learning in a multilingual Europe, there remains a dearth of CLIL-type materials, and a lack of teacher training programmes to prepare both language and subject teachers for CLIL teaching. Until CLIL training for teachers is organised and materials are published, the immediate future remains with parallel rather than integrated content and language learning. However, the need for language teaching reform in the face of Europeanisation may make CLIL a common feature of many European education systems in the future.

Several European organisations specialising in CLIL projects have emerged: UNICOM, EuroCLIC and TIE-CLIL. Research on CLIL is mainly based at the University of Nottingham, which also offers teacher training and development courses in CLIL, available though NILE (the Norwich Institute for Language Education).

Society is changing, particularly in Europe, with changes brought about by the process of integration. It is this reality, alongside our new understandings of language acquisition and learning which has provoked excitement about CLIL. There are social, economic, cultural and ecological advantages to be gained though promoting plurilingualism through language learning. CLIL offers one additional means by which we can give the young people the opportunities to develop their capacity to use language and to reap the benefits in their present and future lives.

REFERENCES

Allwright, R. L. and K. Biley. (1991). *Focus on the Language Classroom – An Introduction to Classroom Research for Language Teachers*. CUP, Cambridge
Cummins, J. (1981). *Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Clevdon, Multilingual Matters
McDonough, J., and Shaw, C. (1995). *Materials and Methods in ELT*,: Basil Blackwell, Oxford
Centre for Information on Language, Teaching and Research, www.cilt.org.uk
CLIL Compendium www.clilcompendium.com
Translanguage in Europe – Content and Language Integrated Learning, www.tieclil.org
Website of University of Jyväskylä, www.jyu.fi
Website of the Central European Regional Network for Education Transfer. European Studies material, www.cernet.at
Website of Eurydice, www.eurydice.org/resources/eurydice/pdf

Abstract

This paper is a synthesis of the characteristic features of CLIL (content-and-language integrated learning). This approach can offer interesting solutions for the teaching of foreign languages - at different levels - for the world of work as it promotes intercultural awareness, internationalisation, and it increases student motivation

Résumé

L'article contient une synthèse des caractéristiques qui font d'EMILE (l'enseignement d'une matière intégré à une langue étrangère) une solution intéressante pour promouvoir l'intercompréhension européenne et pour faire de la citoyenneté européenne une réalité. L'auteur montre comment EMILE crée une atmosphère d'études plus efficace que d'autres méthodes en usage, et comment l'étude des langues étrangères peut bénéficier d'une éducation à double objectif.

Rezumat

Articolul este o sinteză a trăsăturilor caracteristice abordării studiului limbilor străine din perspectiva integrării conţinutului şi a limbii. Această abordare este o soluţie interesantă pentru promovarea cunoaşterii limbilor străine la diferite nivele de performanţă, necesară pieţei muncii, dar şi pentru promovarea cunoaşterii interculturale şi a globalizării. Aceasta abordare cu dublu obiectiv genereaza o motivaţie mai susţinută la cursanţi.